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READING AND WRITING IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH¹

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I am very glad to be the guest of the New England Association of English Teachers, and to find myself *here*. I choose this last phrase, because it indicates my state of mind after some perambulation on the streets of Boston in this part of the city. A German greeting would be appropriate to a stranger who attempts that task: *Wie befinden Sie sich?* And I know that, recognizing the conditions under which I have come to you, you will pardon my being a little behind the hour. In fact, my tardiness is a guarantee of good faith. You will pardon me also for coming to you without any preparation. I tried to make some preparation this morning out in the preacher's room at Harvard, but the boys whom I am here to serve kept me so busy that I had no time except to begin to write down half a sentence.

The object of the teaching of English in schools and colleges is not to make authors. In the first place, you could not do it if you would; and, in the second place, you should not do it if you could. No school or college can make an author. That is a matter which is in the hands of nature, under the direction of

¹A stenographic report of an extempore address to the New England Association of Teachers of English at their annual meeting at Boston University, March 9, 1907. It has been impossible to give Dr. van Dyke an opportunity to revise this report.

what Mrs. Partington once called "an unwise and unscrupulous Providence." There is some subtle balance of mental and emotional powers, some secret gift of insight or of outgo, some skill in feeling the relations of words to things, that can never be defined or reduced to rules, which makes a man or a woman an author—the possession of something to say, and the skill of knowing how to say it. Nor, if it were possible for schools and colleges to make authors, would it be desirable that all the boys and girls who go to our educational institutions should be directed into writing as a means of earning their livelihood. In the first place, the world would not support them; in the second place, the flood of books with which our intellectual integrity is somewhat threatened would be increased vastly, horribly; and, in the third place, the magazine editors would be driven either into an early grave or into a sanitarium. No, the object of the teaching of English in schools and colleges is something very much simpler. In its primary stages, of which I shall speak mainly this morning, the object of the teaching of English is to equip boys and girls to read good books more intelligently and more joyfully, and to use their mother-tongue correctly and to better purpose in the ordinary affairs of life.

Now, about the reading which is to be done in connection with this kind of English teaching. It should, in my opinion, consist of interesting books—I try to weigh every phrase—interesting books, suited to the age of the pupils, well written, and with a healthy human tone. I have been reading the leaflets, two or three of them, published by this association in connection with this subject, and I can only say that there has been so much said and so well said in those leaflets that there is really hardly anything left for me to say. Books of adventure, books of description, books which tell a simple story clearly and vividly, are those which are naturally most suited to young people. Nothing better than *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Jungle Books*, and *Treasure Island*; and, as far as my experience goes, the right kind of girls like those books just as much as the right kind of boys do. Intro-spective books, analytic books, philosophic books, and especially highly pessimistic books, are unsuited for the consumption of

the young person whom we wish to keep in good intellectual and spiritual health. Those books may have their uses in the world, but, like *caviar* and *paté de fois gras*, they should be postponed to a later age, if they are used at all. For this reason I would not start my young people on Ibsen, nor on Bernard Shaw, nor on the modern British female novelist. The way in which these books should be read in the primary stages of English instruction, it seems to me, is somewhat different from the way in which they should be read later.

I note one very interesting paper among the leaflets published by this association, in which attention is called to the complaint made that, owing to the fact that Shakespeare is taken up in the high school and even in the grammar school, there is nothing left for the university professor to do. Well, all I have to say is that the university professor who finds nothing left for him to do has mistaken his vocation. But the study of a play of Shakespeare, say *Othello*, or *Hamlet*, or *The Winter's Tale*, or *Twelfth Night*, or *Julius Caesar*, in a preparatory school or in a high school which does not look toward college training, is quite different from the study of the same thing, in a university course, and should be very much simpler, very much more direct, and guided chiefly with an eye to making the young people feel the fidelity of the thing studied, and get a clearly outlined picture before the mind—a better picture than the modern stage can give, much better—of that which the great master of dramatic poetry intended to show in that particular play.

Comparative literature ought not to be taught to school children. They cannot take it in, and you simply ruin their little digestions if you try to give it to them. Positive literature can be taught to them, literature as the reflection and image of life; and, in order to do that successfully, the teacher's attention, it seems to me, should be directed, first, to the story; second, to the elemental and creative trait in each character; third, to the relation of the action to the development of those characters; and, fourth, to the lesson which the work teaches. Now, that is all as simple as telling a child with whom you walk along the street, and who sees a man that has staggered and reeled blindly

across the street and been run over on his way across, why that thing has happened to that man.

Let me say, and let me say frankly and sincerely and honestly, that in regard to the best literature, the big literature, the great literature, the literature that is worth while, the literature that has lasted, and the literature that is going to last, you can never teach it rightly if you shut your eyes to the moral meaning of it. You cannot do it, because the moral meaning of it is the core of it, and the heart of it; and nine times out of ten the moral meaning of it is the thing for which the man wrote it. I do not mean as a catechist or as a preacher, but I mean as an artist in letters, seeking to embody in his poem, or his play, or his novel, or his short story, the eternal significance and the inevitable consequences of character and choice in this life of man.

You know a great deal more about the technical details of the way to bring out these things in the minds of the pupil—the structure of the story, the relation of the different parts, and so on—than I do, because I am a very young teacher. I have been a teacher for only eight years now. That is all the experience I have had. And the first thing I found out when I tried to do it was that teaching and preaching were two totally different things; because in the church where I used to preach, and where I still preach, and of which I am still a minister, where I preach every Sunday that I can get a chance to, in that church they do not allow anybody to answer back. In some of the churches they do, you know. But in the class, in the properly constructed class, of course everybody is allowed to answer back; and that changes the whole aspect, makes it very much more difficult, and in some respects very much more interesting.

In regard to poetry, I would begin with the teaching of English poetry, begin with the simplest things, and begin with the things that have a story only; and I would believe that those things which have interested so many people are good, no matter what the academic and anaemic critics may say about them. I think Scott's *Lady of the Lake* and *Lay of the Last Minstrel* are good; and I think that the English ballads are good; and I think that Longfellow's ballads and Whittier's ballads are good;

and I think that *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is good—nothing better. I find that those are good things to begin with. Then a little beyond that I would have a range of poems such as Tennyson's *Idyls of the King*, and some of Browning's simpler dramatic lyrics—the simpler ones, because I would not discourage a youthful student from the future enjoyment of Browning by endeavoring to begin it too young. Then, of course, I would use the lyric. Having begun with the narrative form, I would use the pure lyric also. The first poem that my little children ever learned, when they were from four to seven years old, was:

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began,
 So is it now I am a man,
 So shall it be when I am old
 Or let me die.
 The Child is father of the Man:
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

I wonder whether you have ever fully appreciated the beauty of those last lines. It was my little boy who first brought it out to me. He was five then. He used to say it: "The child is farther than the man." I never corrected him. And there is an exquisite beauty in that last word:

And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

That does not mean simply by religious feelings. "Piety" is the old Roman word for reverence for one's parents, and Wordsworth, having said "The child is father of the man," says

And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety;

that is, that I, a man, might reverence that which is the father of my spiritual being in the purity and joyfulness of childhood.

That is what poetry can do for us. That is what poetry can say to us. That is the magic of poetry, by which it interprets those deeper, finer, nobler, purer, inward elements of our life which fools call unreal, but which are, after all, the only real things and the things that make life worth living.

Now, I must not talk too long; but a word about writing. Let me begin with a negative statement. I do not approve of the daily theme. It seems to me absolutely abnormal, unnatural, superfluous, and injurious. I know of no position in life in which one has to produce a daily theme, except that of the newspaper service, and that requires a particular and definite training which the newspaper men themselves will tell you schools and colleges cannot give. The ordinary or garden variety of the human being never has to produce a daily theme, except during that brief period when he or she is in the first glory of an engagement to be married, and then, if those two persons are so unfortunate as to be separated, it becomes necessary for each of them to produce a daily theme. But, my dear fellow-teachers, you need not worry yourselves about that, you can leave that to nature. Nature will take care of it. No, I think it is far more natural and far more simple and far more profitable to have perhaps a weekly theme, or perhaps a fortnightly theme, or something of that kind—and I will tell you, I will just give you my own experience in regard to it in dealing with perhaps a somewhat older class of students. I find it best to ask them not to take a long time in writing that theme, but to think about it, carry it in their mind, and then sit down, take an hour or half-hour, and write it as well as they can and let it go at that; with the idea that they shall get from the writing, and from such criticism as I may be able to give it, some encouragement to write better or some correction of their natural faults. That seems to me the best way.

And as for the subjects, all subjects are good, provided you will persuade your pupils to write about them naturally and spontaneously and frankly. You may take a subject which requires the pupil to go to the encyclopedia in order to find out the facts, but not to carry the paper and pencil to the encyclopedia. Get what you can from the encyclopedia and take it in. Then go away somewhere where there is no encyclopedia; into a happy land where the encyclopedia existeth not, sit down and put your thoughts and notions and ideas and memories and your knowledge and your feeling, whatever it may be, upon paper. I found

a very good way this winter was to ask men to read a poem, or to read it to them. (Let me say here, in passing, since you are allowing me to jump over the fence and go just where I please this afternoon, that all good poetry is meant to be read aloud. Any poem that is written is written to be read out loud or repeated or recited. That is the origin of it, and that is the idea of it; and until you have heard it, you do not know it, if it is a good poem. Of course, that is not true of some poems. But meter being an essential element of poetry—there is another subject, you see there is a big wide gate open there, and I might go out through that gate into a tremendous field—but meter being an essential element of poetry, you never get the full effect of it until it is read aloud.) As I said, I would read a poem aloud to these fellows that were working with me, and then ask them to sit down some evening when they had not the poem by them and write me a description of it, anywhere from five hundred to a thousand words. And by description I mean telling first of all what kind of a poem it is, what order it belongs to—this is for older students—then what meter it is written in, then what the subject is and where the subject came from, and then whether they like it or not, and why. Well, you would be astonished to see how some of those fellows succeed in digesting that bony structure of a descriptive paper and making out of it a really charming little expression of their knowledge and feeling about such a poem as “Mazeppa,” or “Enoch Arden,” or something of that kind.

Then of course, beyond that, one goes on into the comparative criticism, the question of sources and methods, and the question of metrical variations, and all that sort of thing, which belongs to the university life and not to school life. You have got to leave something for that poor university professor.

And then a great thing is that we should be able to get our pupils to understand the life and the power that there are in words—that words are living things, that they are not made, that they grow, and that they grow out of the heart and life of human beings; that words have characters and expressions just as you have characters and your faces have expressions; that all,

or almost all, possible shades of delicate and subtle feeling in our experience can be expressed by words, if we will only learn to treat them as living things, and remember the life out of which they have come, and join them to the life which we desire them to express. Oh, it will be a great service to render to the young men and women of the coming generation if you shall enable them to understand that rich inheritance which is theirs in this glorious English language, the richest—not the sweetest, not the most exact, not the most perfect—but the richest, fullest, most powerful instrument of expression that the human race, I think, has yet developed. “With all its faults we love it still.” And if we don’t love it, and if we don’t love the great literature that has been produced in it, then, ladies and gentlemen, we have no business here.